A Voice in the Wilderness

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" Calvin and Persecution "

Why the Silence!

"...that an end could be put to their machinations in no other way than cutting them off by an ignominious death" (John Calvin).

The great declaration of the Reformation was "Sola Scriptura," Scripture Alone. To this we give a hearty amen. But for John Calvin it clearly was not Scripture alone. It was Scripture plus some key leftovers of the Roman Catholic Church: notably: infant baptism, a state church, and persecution of those who did not fall into line. As H.R Pike writes, "It was Scripture plus the sword of the state, hangings, burning at the stake, prison, tortures..." (The Other Side of John Calvin, p. 54).

Below is evidence that this is not overstatement!

Most who call themselves Calvinist say very little about the famous Reformer having a persecuting side. This reflects a selective silence that began quite early. We are greatly indebted to John Foxe and his Book of Martyrs for detailing the terrible atrocities meted out by Papal Rome. But Foxe, a contemporary and friend of Calvin (he outlived Calvin by 23 years), gives not one paragraph to the many persecutions that took place at Calvin's Geneva and elsewhere across Europe. Only those who suffered at the hand of Rome are mentioned (Pike, n.122).

That Rome's crimes were much greater in magnitude does not excuse this silence concerning the considerable persecution Protestants meted out. Nor can we accept the excuse that "Calvin's actions must be seen in light of the standards of that age". Regardless of the age, the New Testament is the standard against which actions are judged!

CHRONOLOGY OF CALVIN'S LIFE

1509 -- Born at Noyon, northwest of Paris. His father was lawyer-secretary to the local Catholic bishop.

1521 -- Placed on church payroll as a "benefice."

1523 -- Sent to the University of Paris to study for the priesthood. Begins to be attracted to anti Romanist views.

1528 -- His father and older brother are excommunicated from the Catholic Church. Leaves Paris to study law at Orleans and then at Bourges. Comes under the influence of the reformer Melchoir Wolmar.

1531 -- After death of father he returns to Paris to study Greek and Hebrew, but shortly after resumes law studies at Orleans. There he receives a doctorate with highest honours.

1533 -- Comes under the influence of a cousin, Olivetan, a Waldensian pastor and translator of the Bible into French. Makes final break with the Catholic Church and declares himself a Protestant. His writings do not give a clear testimony of his own salvation experience (Pike, pp.7-9).

1533-36 -- Flees Paris, takes up residence in Basel. Finishes first edition of his Institutes of the Christian Religion.

1536 -- Arrives in Geneva, a city that had recently declared itself free from the Catholic Church. Is persuaded by William Farel to develop a church-state system for Geneva. All

in the city are required to attend the Reformed Church. All must give an oath of allegiance to a code of faith and discipline on fear of banishment from the city. In less than two years Calvin and Farel are forced to flee Geneva because of the harshness of their system.

1538 -- Oversees a church of French refugees in Strasbourg. Comes under the influence of Martin Bucer. Revises his Institutes. Writes a commentary on Romans. Does all in his power to oppose the Anabaptists.

CALVIN'S STATEMENTS SUPPORTING PERSECUTION

- Prefatory Address in his Institutes to Francis, King of the French, 1536. "But when I perceived that the fury of certain bad men had risen to such a height in your realm, that there was no place in it for sound doctrine, I thought it might be of service if I were in the same work both to give instruction to my countrymen, and also lay before your Majesty a Confession, from which you may learn what the doctrine is that so inflames the rage of those madmen who are this day, with fire and sword, troubling your kingdom. For I fear not to declare, that what I have here given may be regarded as a summary of the very doctrine which, they vociferate, ought to be punished with confiscation, exile, imprisonment, and flames, as well as exterminated by land and sea. This, I allow, is a fearful punishment which God sends on the earth; but if the wickedness of men so deserves, why do we strive to oppose the just vengeance of God?"

- Letter to William Farel, February 13, 1546. "If he [Servetus] comes [to Geneva], I shall never let him go out alive if my authority has weight."

- Letter to the Lord Protector of Somerset, adviser to King Edward VI, October 22, 1548. "[They] well deserve to be repressed by the sword which is committed to you, seeing that they attack not the King only, but God who has seated him upon the throne, and has entrusted to you the protection as well of His person as of His majesty."

- Letter of August 20, 1553, one week after Servetus arrest. "I hope that Servetus will be condemned to death."

- Defense of Orthodox Faith against the Prodigious Errors of the Spaniard Michael Servetus, published in early 1554. "Whoever shall now contend that it is unjust to put heretics and blasphemers to death will knowingly and willingly incur their very guilt. This is not laid down on human authority; it is God who speaks and prescribes a perpetual rule for his Church. It is not in vain that he banishes all those human affections which soften our hearts; that he commands paternal love and all the benevolent feelings between brothers, relations, and friends to cease; in a word, that he almost deprives men of their nature in order that nothing may hinder their holy zeal. Why is so implacable a severity exacted but that we may know that God is defrauded of his honour, unless the piety that is due to him be preferred to all human duties, and that when his glory is to be asserted, humanity must be almost obliterated from our memories? Many people have accused me of such ferocious cruelty that I would like to kill again the man I have destroyed. Not only am I indifferent to their comments, but I rejoice in the fact that they spit in my face."

- Preface to Commentaries, July 22, 1557. "To these irreligious characters. and despisers of the heavenly doctrineŠ. I think that there is scarcely any of the weapons which are forged in the workshop of Satan, which has not been employed by them in order to obtain their object. And at length matters had come to such a state, that an end could be put to their machinations in no other way than cutting them off by an ignominious death; which was indeed a painful and pitiable spectacle to me. They no doubt deserved the severest

punishment, but I always rather desired that they might live in prosperity, and continue safe and untouched; which would have been the case had they not been altogether incorrigible, and obstinately refused to listen to wholesome admonition."

- Comments on Ex. 22:20, Lev. 24:16, Deut. 13:5-15, 17:2-5. "Moreover, God Himself has explicitly instructed us to kill heretics, to smite with the sword any city that abandons the worship of the true faith revealed by Him."

- Letter to the Marquis Paet, chamberlain to the King of Navarre, 1561. "Honour, glory, and riches shall be the reward of your pains; but above all, do not fail to rid the country of those scoundrels [Anabaptists and others], who stir up the people to revolt against us. Such monsters should be exterminated, as I have exterminated Michael Servetus the Spaniard."

PERSECUTIONS AT CALVIN'S GENEVA

The Minutes Book of the Geneva City Council, 1541-59 (translated by Stefan Zweig, Erasmus: The Right to Heresy):

- "During the ravages of the pestilence in 1545 more than twenty men and women were burnt alive for witchcraft.

- From 1542 to 1546 fifty-eight judgements of death and seventy-six decrees of banishment were passed.

- During the years 1558 and 1559 the cases of various punishments for all sorts of offences amounted to four hundred and fourteen.

- One burgher smiled while attending a baptism: three days imprisonment.

- Another, tired out on a hot summer day, went to sleep during a sermon: prison.

- Some workingmen ate pastry at breakfast: three days on bread and water.

- Two burghers played skittles: prison.

- Two others diced for a quarter bottle of wine: prison.

- A blind fiddler played a dance: expelled from the city.

- Another praised Castellio's translation of the Bible: expelled from Geneva.

- A girl was caught skating, a widow threw herself on the grave of her husband, a burgher offered his neighbour a pinch of snuff during divine service: they were summoned before the Consistory, exhorted, and ordered to do penance.

- Some cheerful fellows at Epiphany stuck a bean into the cake: four-and-twenty hours on bread and water.

- A couple of peasants talked about business matters on coming out of church: prison.

- A man played cards: he was pilloried with the pack of cards hung around his neck.

- Another sang riotously in the street: was told 'they could go and sing elsewhere,' this meaning he was banished from the city.

- Two bargees had a brawl: executed.
- A man who publicly protested against the reformer's doctrine of predestination was flogged at all the crossways of the city and then expelled.
- A book printer who in his cups [columns] had railed at Calvin, was sentenced to have his tongue perforated with a red-hot iron before being expelled from the city.
- Jacques Gruent was racked and then executed for calling Calvin a hypocrite.
- Each offence, even the most paltry, was carefully entered in the record of the Consistory, so that the private life of every citizen could unfailingly be held up against him in evidence." (See Pike, pp. 61-63).

Sources quoted in Philip Schaff's History of the Christian Church, vol. 8:

- "The death penalty against heresy, idolatry and blasphemy and barbarous customs of torture were retained. Attendance at public worship was commanded on penalty of three sols. Watchmen were appointed to see that people went to church. The members of the Consistory visited every house once a year to examine the faith and morals of the family. Every unseemly word and act on the street was reported, and the offenders were cited before the Consistory to be either censured and warned, or to be handed over to the Council for severer punishment."
- Several women, among them the wife of Ami Perrin, the captain-general, were imprisoned for dancing.
- A man was banished from the city for three months because on hearing an ass bray, he said jestingly 'He prays a beautiful psalm.'
- A young man was punished because he gave his bride a book on housekeeping with the remark: 'This is the best Psalter.'
- Three men who laughed during a sermon were imprisoned for three days.
- Three children were punished because they remained outside of the church during the sermon to eat cakes.
- A man who swore by the 'body and blood of Christ' was fined and condemned to stand for an hour in the pillory on the public square.
- A child was whipped for calling his mother a thief and a she-devil.
- A girl was beheaded for striking her parents.
- A banker was executed for repeated adultery.
- A person named Chapuis was imprisoned for four days because he persisted in calling his child Claude (a Roman Catholic saint) instead of Abraham.
- Men and women were burnt to death for witchcraft. (See Pike, pp. 55,56).

From Other Sources:

- Belot, an Anabaptist was arrested for passing out tracts in Geneva and also accusing

Calvin of excessive use of wine. With his books and tracts burned, he was banished from the city and told not to return on pain of hanging (J.L. Adams, The Radical Reformation, pp. 597-598).

- Martin Luther said of Calvin's actions in Geneva, "With a death sentence they solve all argumentation" (Juergan L. Neve, A History of Christian Thought, vol. I, p. 285).

- "About the month of January 1546, a member of the Little Council, Pierre Ameaux, asserted that Calvin was nothing but a wicked man - who was preaching false doctrine. Calvin felt that his authority as an interpreter of the Word of God was being attacked: he so completely identified his own ministry with the will of God that he considered Ameaux's words as an insult to the honour of Christ. The Magistrates offered to make the culprit beg Calvin's pardon on bended knees before the Council of the Two Hundred, but Calvin found this insufficient. On April 8, Ameaux was sentenced to walk all round the town, dressed only in a shirt, bareheaded and carrying a lighted torch in his hand, and after that to present himself before the tribunal and cry to God for mercy" (F. Wendel, Calvin, pp. 85, 86).

"Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?" James 3:11.

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